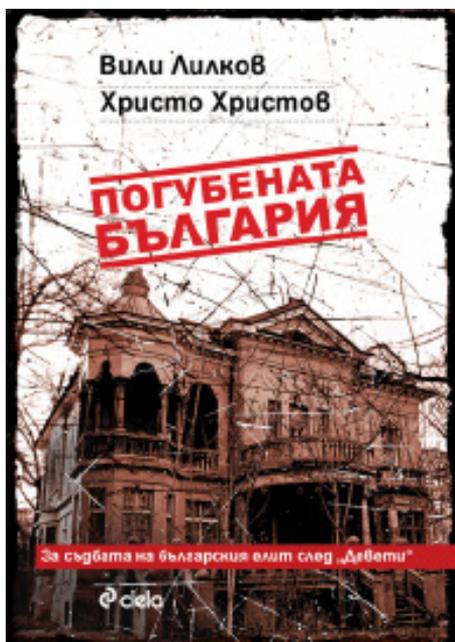


A GRIM ACCOUNT OF ATROCITIES IN POST-WAR BULGARIA

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Lilkov, V., Hristov, H. (2019). *Pogubenata Bulgaria*. Sofia: Siela. [Лилков, В., Христоф, Х. *Погубената България*. София: Сиела, 2019]

Villi Lilkov and Hristo Hristov's book *Ruined Bulgaria* (*Pogubenata Bulgaria*) is a grim account of the initial period of communist rule in Bulgaria. The research period is not precisely defined but most of the stories cover the first post war decade. This is understandable given the fact that the post war period saw the most vigorous violence and intense repressions. In some cases the fate of the victims of the regime is briefly presented in the following decades. The study is well structured. It is written on the basis of a significant number of documents and provides additional information on the mechanisms that the Communist Party used to eliminate its class enemies, the so called *former people*, from the socio-political life. The term *former people* includes politicians from inter-war political parties, officers, civil servants, industrialists, wealthy agrarian owners, etc. (22, note 2)

The research is structured around the main repressive methods used by the authorities after 9 September 1944 – executions without trial and sentence, internments in labour camps, evictions, seizure of property, etc. Extensive attention is paid to the People's Court and the work of the judicial panels in Gabrovo, Sliven, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, etc. The authors argue that the people whom the communists repressed had distinctive social profiles. They were mostly people with a high social status before 1944, with a good education and a high standard of living. These individuals were socially active and respected by the society. According to Lilkov and Hristov, it was precisely their social status that turned them into enemies of the new government, which tried to come into power by various means. The abolishment of the former political, social and economic elite of Bulgaria was one of the means for the establishment of the

communists as a ruling and undisputable authority.

The book presents numerous cases of people killed, missing, sent to camps, evicted, laid off, arrested or repressed otherwise. Stories sound ominous and examples of extreme cruelty and injustice are often given. From the text it seems that violence was not always politically or ideologically motivated. The authors provide interesting illustrations of the quest for personal benefits by the communist nomenklatura. For instance, the property of many evicted people from Sofia and other major cities was appropriated by State Security personnel, policemen and other persons closely connected to the Communist Party. (74–75) Officers of the preliminary inquest who, through various methods similar to those of the medieval Inquisition, tortured the detainees in order to force them to make confessions necessary for the investigation and received generous financial rewards. (154)

However, the authors fail to address adequate research questions that are fundamental and necessary for any meaningful study. Instead of offering a deep and multifaceted approach to the post-war atrocities in Bulgaria, Lilkov and Hristov rarely place them in a broader socio-political context. Authors mainly attribute the violence to inherent communist malice, desire for revenge and uncontrolled use of power. They almost completely ignore the historiography of the political development of Bulgaria and the violence since 9 September 1944. Lilkov and Hristov point out that this issue is not addressed before their previous book *Former People (Bivshi hora)* was published in 2017. (15) Actually, there is academic literature on political violence and therefore a more moderate claim that the present study extends and clarifies our knowledge in this sphere is much fairer and more accurate. Reference to existing literature might have protected the authors from some inaccurate interpretations regarding Bulgarian-American relations in 1950 and their restoration in 1959.

The study of Villi Lilkov and Hristo Hristov is an interesting contribution to the existing research on the history of modern Bulgaria. It will appeal to anyone wishing to receive more information about the atrocities committed by the communist regime in the initial period of its establishment. For readers interested in a more in-depth interpretation of the facts and answers to questions that begin with “why”, this book is not the right source of knowledge.